

## **FOUR MONTANA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TAKE TRIP OF A LIFETIME**

There is an enormous difference between day to day life in rural Montana versus the busy and hectic subways and monuments of Washington D.C. Our nation's history, ethnically diverse people from around the U.S and the world, and a metro mass transit system are some of the many profound differences that four Montana high school students experienced firsthand in a recent trip to our nation's capital. Leann Dorvall from Bridger, Michele Perry from Butte, Jasmine Warner from Anaconda, and Merrilee Thomas from Whitefish won an all expenses paid trip to represent Montana at the Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) National Leadership Conference held December 4 - 6th of this year. These four high school students' journey began when they chose to enroll in the Jobs for Montana's Graduates (JMG) class at their high school. As members in their local JMG Montana Career Association Chapter, these students submitted the top four essays in a competition held in conjunction with JMG's 15th Annual Fall Leadership Conference in Helena on October 29, 2008. The prize - a trip to D.C. to attend JAG's National Leadership Conference.

JMG is the program of choice for high schools seeking to improve their students' success in staying in school through graduation, having a meaningful career plan and becoming contributing members of the workforce and economy. As an affiliate of JAG, a nationally recognized drop-out prevention program, JMG is recognized as one of Montana's and the nation's most cost effective, high performing programs for serving students with barriers. JMG students map out meaningful career plans to achieve their career goals and enter the workforce with work ready soft-skills required by employers. Montana's JMG program received the JAG prestigious "5 of 5" Performance Award for each of the last three years by meeting or exceeding the five national standards set by JAG, which included JMG's impressive graduation rate of 94% or above for all participating seniors over the last three years.



*Jasmine Warner of Anaconda, Merrilee Thomas of Whitefish, Leann Dorvall of Bridger, and Michelle Perry of Butte in Washington D.C.*

All four of these students have overcome huge obstacles with the help of the JMG program and the extraordinary teachers who mentor them. Each has a different history of struggle and adversity but all share the same outcome; successful and confident leaders of their peers.

Leann Dorvall from Bridger used to be the girl that *"stayed in the background and never spoke up or stood up for anything."* Through watching her brother grow and mature in JMG and then her own involvement in this program she gained enough confidence to help her become the Vice President of her JMG Career

Committee, president of the local FFA chapter, as well as president of her senior class. Leann was shocked and excited to be selected as a delegate to the JAG Leadership Conference in D.C.

Her favorite experiences included the Korean, WWII, and Iwo Jima War memorials, as well as *"all the different backgrounds students came from and how they would open up about their experiences and what their life was like."*

Michele Perry of Butte was homeless this last summer and enrolled at Butte Webster Garfield this fall *"to break up the monotony of the day; something to do besides sit around homeless and depressed. Upon entering the JMG class I felt welcome and the desire to turn things around came over me."* Her strong desire and motivation to improve her life as well as attend the JAG National Leadership Conference in D.C. was evident in her winning essay with comments like, *"I have been applying the skills learned in (JMG) class to my daily life. I am trying which is far different than years past. I am able to see a future and I know that I am doing activities that will benefit me down the road. JMG is one reason I am still in school."*

Jasmine Warner of Anaconda wrote in her essay that *"I learn something new every day from (JMG) class, and that gives me hope and confidence."* She would not have made that statement a little over a year ago as she contemplated suicide. Jasmine suffered from severe depression at an early age that led to trouble with the law including drug abuse. By her own admission she was angry and defiant for years. She learned she was pregnant on her 17th birthday. For Jasmine, her daughter's birth was a major turning point that changed her perspective forever. Jasmine is now married to the father and is the proud mother of her daughter Carmen. Her teacher, Sara Novak, feels that she has completely bought into JMG including being elected by her peers as Treasurer of their MCA chapter.

Merrilee Thomas who attends the Whitefish Independent High School has lived through more in her young life than most can imagine. *"I was born to a paranoid schizophrenic, self medicated mother."* And so began her journey with several foster homes, as well as alcohol and drug abuse. *"When I was ten years old, I had my first waste." "I continued to drink whenever I could, and I was taking pills and smoking weed constantly."* Many steps along the way have helped to transform her life. In-house alcohol and drug treatment, attending AA meetings including sponsoring other girls, Outward Bound, Montana Conservation Corps, and now the JMG program have all contributed to helping Merrilee realize *"how much of a positive influence I have on kids now. It makes me wonder how much negative influence I was putting into the world when I was using."* *"Kids come to me for advice. Peers I hardly know come to me with their problems. I swear I am a magnet for people to unload on. This used to bother me a lot because I couldn't keep their pain at a distance; their pain became my pain. Now I let them feel their pain and help them solve their problems."* While Merrilee has traveled extensively throughout the western U.S., she had never been back east and experienced quite a *"culture shock."* When asked what most struck her about the trip she said, *"The Vietnam Memorial - it was really powerful to see all those names."* She believes that this trip will help her build on her strengths as a leader and strengthen her knowledge on how to empower other kids. *"I want to see how my leadership can create change in myself, my family, and my community."*